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DE RUEHGB #3913/01 3361701

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FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4613

INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003913

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/01/2017

TAGS: PREL PGOV PINS PINR IZ

SUBJECT: TALABANI BLASTS MALIKI BUT IS OPTIMISTIC ON SECURITY AND KEY LEGISLATION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Patricia A. Butenis for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Deputy Secretary Negroponte, S/I Satterfield, and CDA Butenis met November 30 with Iraqi President Talabani. Talabani endorsed Washington's efforts to renew the UNSCR resolution authorizing the presence of U.S. and other Coalition forces and expressed serious impatience with Prime Minister Maliki. Talabani noted that the Kurdish Alliance could bring down the Maliki government at any time, and would consider doing so unless Maliki improves his cooperation with others in the GOI. He professed optimism, however, about the passage of key legislation, improving Iraqi attitudes toward the U.S. presence, and greater willingness among most Sunni Arab countries to engage in Iraq. End Summary.

MALIKI'S DEMANDS REASONABLE BUT UNSCR MUST BE RENEWED

¶2. (C) The Deputy addressed Maliki's suggested revisions to this year's UNSCR, including granting the GOI full authority over all detentions and final authorization of any security operation. While acknowledging these issues were suitable for discussion next year as part of a long-term security deal, the Deputy called them impossible limitations under present conditions. Talabani argued that the U.S. should accept some of Maliki's argument for vesting greater control in GOI hands, noting that after five years of independence the GOI still cannot unilaterally move a battalion from one location to another; that the U.S. had "unilaterally" created the Concerned Local Citizen groups; and that the U.S. was not responsive to Iraqi FMS needs; that the U.S. had "unilaterally" created the Concerned Local Citizen groups; and that the U.S. was not responsive to Iraqi FMS needs. He also expressed concern that CG Petraeus does not consult closely enough with Maliki, arguing coordination between the two could ease bilateral security negotiations. Talabani ultimately agreed, however, that most of Maliki's changes were best left to long-term negotiations following a prompt UNSCR renewal.

KURDS IMPATIENT WITH MALIKI'S REFUSAL TO COMPROMISE

¶3. (C) Talabani condemned Maliki's perceived failure to compromise and his dependence on a dictatorial, sectarian cadre of advisors. He decried Maliki's tendency to bypass his own cabinet, instead consulting only close allies like Muwaffaq al-Rubaie, Sami al-Askari, or Bassima al-Jaidri. These Maliki advisors, whom Talabani repeatedly identified as the "dishdash government," in the Iraqi President's view have no interest in achieving consensus and represent the

largest current obstacle to effective governance.

¶4. (C) Talabani noted that the Maliki government would fall if the Kurdish Alliance withdrew its support. He said he had threatened to withdraw Kurdish ministers from the cabinet when he perceived Maliki to be stonewalling Strategic Partnership Declaration negotiations, and said that option remains on the table if Maliki continues to rule unilaterally. Talabani also noted that while the Kurdish Alliance would have little difficulty accumulating the votes in the COR for a no-confidence vote in Maliki, it would only consider such action if a replacement PM were already identified and after coordinating with the USG.

BRIGHTER OUTLOOK ON KEY LEGISLATION, PERCEPTIONS OF US

¶5. (C) Talabani professed optimism on key legislation, predicting the COR would pass the de-Ba'athification, hydrocarbons, and provincial powers laws and urging active US engagement in the process. On de-Ba'athification, Talabani acknowledged procedural obstacles over the last few days and a potential delay due to the Hajj, but predicted passage before the end of 2007 because all blocs except the Sadrists agree on the draft. On hydrocarbons, he said substantive disagreements between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the GOI could be resolved if Maliki would meet with Nechirvan Barzani directly, instead of allowing Oil Minister Shahristani to attack the KRG in the press; Talabani pledged his willingness to participate in such a meeting. Talabani called both the GOI and KRG Oil Ministers poor appointments who publicly air their personal rivalry and who should be excluded from negotiations on the hydrocarbon

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law.

¶6. (C) Talabani raised this week's Kurdish Alliance walkout from the COR, noting key legislation could not pass unless MPs can reach the COR unobstructed and seconding MPs, complaints about poor treatment at MNF/CF checkpoints into the International Zone. He acknowledged the difficulties and stresses of maintaining security around these entry points, but demanded greater courtesy by U.S. personnel and suggested vehicle passes so MPs could enter the green zone with less difficulty.

¶7. (C) Turning to the broader situation in Iraq, the Deputy suggested a key step in consolidating recent security gains would be to publicize events suggesting a return to normalcy in both the U.S. and Iraqi press. He offered Iraqi weddings or the recent reopening of the Baghdad museum as examples. Talabani agreed, adding that press coverage of stability in the Kurdish region also would improve popular perceptions of Iraq's security environment. He argued that Iraqi public opinion as a whole is turning toward the U.S.: Sunnis who turned against al-Qaida and even the Sunni political elite had acknowledged the value of a continuing U.S. presence, the Kurds had always been pro-U.S., and non-Sadrist Shia broadly accept Ayatollah Sistani's implicit acceptance of U.S. efforts.

IRAQI TIES TO SUNNI ARAB STATES IMPROVING

¶8. (C) Talabani provided greater detail on his recent visits to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Both the Egyptian and Kuwaiti governments are preparing to send ambassadors to Baghdad. Cairo is drafting a "strategic alliance" with Iraq which will establish committees to manage bilateral relations in security, trade, culture, and other areas. On the other hand, Talabani said he does not expect Riyadh to send an ambassador to Iraq despite its public pledges to do so. Saudi officials told him repeatedly they would not deal with

the Maliki government despite Talabani's entreaties. Talabani ascribed this mistrust to a deep Wahhabi antipathy to all things Shia and the Saudi perception that Maliki had failed to deliver on pledges made to the Saudi government.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Talabani was unusually blunt in his criticism of Maliki, and his threat to withdraw support for Maliki might prove to be an important lever in negotiations over the UNSCR renewal. However, we doubt that the Kurds are truly prepared to dispense with Maliki, particularly because they hope to use his dependency on Kurdish support as leverage during any future debates on Article 140 and hydrocarbons. End comment.

¶10. (U) The Deputy Secretary's party has cleared this cable.
BUTENIS